



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/DAVID KAMERMAN

Kevin Smith (left) read from the Bible as he helped the Rev. Jedediah Mannis conduct a service for homeless people in Porter Square in Cambridge on a recent Sunday morning, part of the Outdoor Church.

Spiritual Life

RICH BARLOW

Ministry finds prophecy in the streets

Christians celebrate today the birth of a child whose family, according to Luke's Gospel, could not find shelter.

Two millennia later, the manger has been replaced by the street as the slumbering place for the homeless. Cambridge's newest church ministers to this flock in their own space, with only the sky for a roof.

On a recent Sunday, the words of the prophet were read outside the subway walls — to be precise, on the sidewalk by the Porter Square T station. There, the lector proclaimed from Isaiah: "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding."

The five congregants and the Rev. Jedediah Mannis heard a choir of Sunday morning traffic and warning beeps from a nearby truck. In place of saintly statuary, giant horseshoe-crab shapes atop the MBTA station's towering mobile twirled in the chilly December wind.

This is the scene every Sunday for the Outdoor Church. A collaboration between several congregations in Harvard and Porter Squares, the nondenominational worship service includes prayer, communion, and refreshments.

Services began about two years ago on the Cambridge Common. The Porter Square service was added two months ago, and Man-

nis hopes to begin one in Central Square in the spring. If that happens, he expects the 40 to 50 homeless people who attend the existing services each month to double. (The Outdoor Church also holds Thursday evening worship at Christ Church Cambridge.)

"They're giving a good service to these [homeless] people," said Mark Anderson, a beefy man in a jogging suit who attended the recent worship and was formerly homeless. "What better way to honor them than by coming to Mass?"

Standing next to him, a friend, who identified himself only as Pete, said he alternates between the streets and homeless shelters. He comes to the Outdoor Church because of the kindness of the people who attend.

"We're just people," Pete said. "We're going through tough times, and nobody cares."

Basing its service loosely on the Book of Common Prayer used by Episcopalians, the Outdoor Church is modeled on Boston's Common Cathedral, another outdoor service for the homeless. On inclement days, worship moves inside the T station at Porter Square and into Christ Church for the other services.

Attendance isn't restricted to the homeless. Standing with Anderson and Pete was Mardi

Moran, co-owner of Tags Hardware in the Porter Square shopping center. She used to get angry at aggressive panhandlers at the shopping center who frighten her customers and staff.

"But meeting these guys and seeing their sensitivity to each other, that's really impressive," she said. "We brought them some hand warmers, and I was trying to give some guy four of them last week, and he said, 'No, I only need

two because the other guys need them.' I mean, you don't see that a whole lot in our society."

The notion of an outdoor ministry is at once obvious and counterintuitive. It reaches the homeless where they are found. Yet isn't it contrary to the goal of bringing the homeless in from the cold, literally and spiritually?

"There are innumerable shelters, meals programs," Mannis replied. "There are places to get clothes. And one of our jobs for sure is to intermediate between the people outdoors and those services. But we are primarily a church. . . . As we see our mission, it's to bring the church to people who are outdoors and who cannot or will not find their way into a building."

Manni, 59, one of several ministers who conduct the services, looked like a street preacher

with his priest's collar and his purple Advent stole draped around his neck. But an unusual arc brought him to ministry. His day job is running a nonprofit group that preserves open space. He's also a Yale-educated lawyer who spends one night each month at homeless shelters in Cambridge and Boston, where he does pro bono work for residents.

But "increasingly, I began to think I was not so much a lawyer who wanted to do good work as I was a minister who happened to be trained as a lawyer," Mannis said. He went to Harvard Divinity School and was ordained by the United Church of Christ to work with the Outdoor Church.

As unusual as this church is, Isaiah's ancient words resonated to some who listened outside a 21st-century subway station. The prophet's description of the coming Emmanuel — "He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear. But with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth" — reminded Anderson of his own judgmental attitudes before alcoholism landed him on the streets.

"I used to always look down on the homeless. Then I became homeless myself," he said with a rueful chuckle. "How is that [for] getting humbled, you know?"

Questions, comments, and story ideas can be sent to spiritual@globe.com.

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MARDI MORAN
store co-owner